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Quebec's music scene: Rock trails, time warps, and total alienation

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for The Gazette

As an exclusively English-speaking wandering American writer from the New York-Los Angeles axis, I've felt foreign in all sorts of places: Teheran, Bombay, Goa, Tijuana, even Brownsville, Texas. But I've never felt as alien as the time in Montreal I caught a showing of I can't remember what film it was (something, I think, about northern Quebec prostitution in the '30s), but it was an obvious Quebecois opus and there were no subtitles: I was in there basically just for the purely cinematic texture of the non-cognitive action on screen and those few words of dialogue I could pick up by virtue of my brief exposure to spoken French way back in junior high school language lab.

Punk that I was, every second I was all too aware I was *missing* more than I was catching, missing more and more as time went on and by the conclusion I was stunned at how much I was capable of being threatened by a mere roll of celluloid . . .

In any event I still left the theatre feeling that I'd grasped certain evident cultural givens, one of which was that Quebec films (if I might take the liberty of using just this one as a yardstick) were without a doubt less pompous/pretentious/sensitive/wimpy than their counterparts from France (which I'd witnessed only with subtitles or dubbing but some things are *obvious*, period). Okay so the point is if you take Robert Charlebois' *Longue Distance* album and hand it over to some random Anglo-honky who's never experienced so much as a note of Robert's work he or she is still fully capable of making judgments based on its rather obvious similarities to the France — real or imagined — *everybody's* been exposed to from Maurice Chevalier to Yves Montand to *Five Nights of a Dreamer*: that is it's limpidly ooh-là-là to an extent normally found only on 69 cent bargain LP's like *Paris Nights* by the 101 Strings. Which could be of little musical interest to a with-it culturally neutral hard-rock fan of the '70s, let alone anyone familiar with the gent's earlier efforts of extreme R&R value (thanks to friends in the Province I've known of his goodies for years). *Punch Creole* is the merest of ersatz Paris street-band bossa nova or whatever. *Partir* begins with a touch of Debussy for all the ef-

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fetes/aesthetes and proceeds as just another conspicuously poignant-for-its-own-sake piece of fluff (and who needs to go to Charlebois for his quota of fluff?). *Valentin pour Mouffe* strikes the ear as just so much Johnny-Mathis-with-a-French-accent pap (unless it's Sinatra he's attempting to ape, in which case excuse me, Bob!). *Je reviendrai a Montreal* is *I Left My Heart in San Francisco* without benefit of the warning that Tony Bennett's name on the disc would've given. *Mourir de jeunesse* feels like *Gigi* or *The Pink Panther* or one of *them*, maybe *King of Hearts* at best. The irony of *Cartier (Jacques)* is all in the parentheses: *Michelle* revisited with a historical backdrop as its excuse. And *The Frog Song* comes off at this stage of the game like some ultra-sensitive black performer doing *The Nigger Song* and getting very few laughs from his patrons in so doing (kicking a dead horse *vigorously* and *embarrassingly*).

So anyway the word I get from the cognoscenti that Robert's indeed looking for a wider world-wide Francophile audience only enhances the notion on my part (makes me feel like some Ralph J. Gleason type cretin to say it) that the Elvis of Quebec is finally making the same gestures at general acceptability as the original Mr. Presley himself, leading ultimately to a weakening of his commitment to all those tenets of rock and roll he once so savagely stood for . . . a pity.

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Then we've got Pierre Nadeau's *Extra-Ordinaire* which sounds almost as merely commercial in almost as lost-for-the-cosmic-fold a way. Side one is Bill Evans meets Ferrante & Teicher, not enough Bill though. That whole ground-swell-of-feeling approach to constructing a musical whatchamacallit, where all life's little whatsits get episodically swept away in the apocalypse, is okey-dokey as far as all that goes and I wouldn't want anybody else soundtracking the cataclysm for me (and since Pierre's listed for all the composer credits he certainly does outdo Tchaikowsky!), but . . . Side two's a good bit jazzier in an Ellington-all-the-way-up-to-contemporary sort of way (horns and everything) so I guess the album is more or less an intentional showcase of at least bifaceted keyboard virtuosity.

Which brings us to a pair of bootlegs by the Ville Emard Blues Band of which Nadeau (who the last time I saw him had a pint of Pernod in his back pocket) has been an integral part, *Minute!—Ville Emard Blues Band s'en vient* and *Guess Who's Coming to Jam*. The sound of the former is clearly not as awesome as on the group's *Live à Montreal* and there are a large number of repeats (actually, only *Rawn's Blues* is new) — but as a package it presents that debut album's more exciting tunes in more compact form (one record is more portable than two). *Poiros nevroses* has the still quite potent "space" feel of 1962 Eric Dolphy/Jaki Byard, Renald Montemiglio on alto sax and Nadeau on piano building and sustaining the spectral atmosphere. *Konkey Donkey* adds a rhythm section of truly mountainous proportion to the Dolphyesqueness just alluded to, the most total fusion of jazz and good old get-down rock and roll ever committed to vinyl. Charles Mingus would sell his beergut to the devil for a band like this, or even for a chance to jam with the guys if he's still up to such a challenge. It's the absolute fulfillment of everything he's ever been after musically (even to the tinkle-tinkle of Nadeau's clavinette meanderings): the crossroads of so many disparate musical modes never before successfully introduced to each other in so viable a manner. Ville Emard when they're hot (if in fact they are ever to exist in so "stable" a form again) are capable of literally *burying* the Anglo-American competition. It's an outright tragedy that no international context has yet been found for so devastating and trans-historical a music.

And even the non-"cosmic" stuff is impressive to the nth degree. *Rawn's Blues* is an excellent slide guitar excursion, in much better company than slide is likely to find itself. And Christiane Robichaud's crooning on *Ste-Melanie Blues* beats heck out of Claudine Longet, systematically surrounded by an orchestration without strings as impressive as has been developed anywhere.

Guess Who's Coming is a lot looser, kind of a jammer's jam per se with interesting idiosyncrasies (accidents?) (sloppiness?) in the mixing department. *Konky Dunky* (another spelling) for instance has the sax solo so low that the supportive piano dickerings are fully audible (a lot like early Miles Davis-Thelonious Monk sessions), giving the listener a chance to actually see how the whole gotterdammerung is constructed. The title cut combines the '60s and '70s with tons of 21st century, its horn section solid enough to give such established jazz-obsessed opportunists as Chicago the willies, its incongruous sections of post-psychedelic oompah held together by mere hippie juxtapositional bravado: good! All in all, an (inadvertent?) articulation of some rather dynamic possibilities for jazz-oriented rock production far in excess of what John McLaughlin et al's imaginings have so far encompassed in terms of actual accomplishment.

Another not-half-bad experiments-in-production feeler, albeit one falling a bit shorter in the orthodox R&R palatability department, is Aut-chose's *Prends une chance avec moe*. With Lucien Francoeur miked way up most of the way and the rest of the band thus being subservient in spite of itself, this album has the ring of analysis rather than actual delivery — but the analysis is often right on the money. *Le freak de Montreal* with its Pink Floyd name-drop comes off as an okay comment on Montreal culture-dropping and maybe that's the whole point: It's as easy to drop entire vistas of cultural perception as it is to drop mere proper-noun citations. *Ch't'aime pi ch't'en vieux* is loaded with gratuitous production references to early Who and even such early Mothers tricks as that classic Billy Mundi drum sound. *Pousse pas ta luck OK bebe* dissects the "continental" influence on Quebec musical posturing and *Devant le miroir* takes on the Rolling Stones' *Ruby Tuesday* from exactly that continental angle (Europe was definitely at one time a crucial factor in the Stones' changes of musical direction). In any event those references to Gaul that stick out like a sore thumb are a lot more *ironic* than any Charlebois currently seems partial to dropping in his own tunes. All things considered, there is a Fran-

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coeur persona which persists beneath the production spotlights, a cinema tough guy with stations of the '70s cross to proceed through (if you will: the real Bruce Springsteen — or at least an example of one such entity . . .).

On Aut'chose's follow-up, *Une nuit comme une autre*, the production is a great deal tighter, more organic, more down-to-business. Right from the opening track, *Nancy Beaudoin*, the sound has more bottom to it and is thus a damn sight more exciting, with stolen Who and Blue Oyster Cult riffs that add up musically this time; even the use of phasing on the heavy breathing is carried off with an eye towards structural unity. *Vancouver, une nuit comme une autre* contains perhaps the greatest topical name-drop of all time (that stuff about being with an Indian girl of 14 and thus feeling like Jim Morrison in Paris), one all the with-its over a certain age can certainly relate to, making that "si vous pouvez comprendre" line all the more welcome-to-the-club-ish: of *course* we can dig it, Lucien! *Ambulance Francoeur* is a titular name-drop of *Morrison Hotel* dimension, also copping a still-viable BOC riff from *Flaming Telepaths* just as Kiss would do. *Blue jeans sur la plage* is an extraordinary recreation of mid-'60s Anglo-Am ominousness, combining equal parts Beatles and Stones in a musical network where both factions are not only not at war but in fact make actual sense together. A touch of Beach Boys too in the listing of beaches, not unlike *Surfin' USA*.

On side two *Comme a radio* begins with Wagner's *Lohengrin* in much the manner in which it was used in the Beatles' *Help!* film, occasionally getting it to sound like the Doors' *LA Woman* (what an incredible insight into cosmic similarity!): A more eschatological analysis-in-lieu-of-total-delivery than just about anyone else has ever gotten away with. *Le silence et atroce, Aut'chose est atroce aussi*: a very self-referential group! Meanwhile the production on *Une saison en enfer* is joyously *I Am the Walrus* revisited, more calculated and selective than 1967-68 and superconscious of the ambience of ensuing "decay" so prevalent in that era (very latter-day Moody Blues and Procol Harum as well to broaden the musical framework beyond mere over-the-hill Beatles).

Quebec's music in general seems to be operating not just in a time warp, but in one where the various pieces of past are capable of being assembled as integral non-nostalgic chunks of contemporary meat. Often the product of such reassembling is in many ways superior to any of its original components in their original historical contexts: The only problem as I see it (other than language of course) is one of marketing the whole thing in locales on the world-wide musical map where today's youngish audiences either have no sense of history or are busy main-

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taining a snobbery that demands as frivolous and haphazard a mere nostalgia as is possible (consider the recent success stories of Springsteen, the Tubes, current David Bowie, even the latest Stones tour and pudgy old Elvis). Which makes stateside fame and fortune for Michel Pagliaro, whose two current LP's — *Pagliaro* and *Pagliaro I* — are as solid as any British or American long players of the past 10 to 12 years (bar none), seemingly a bit remote a prospect for the foreseeable future. Which is a rock-roll calamity if there ever was one, particularly in light of all the bland and talentless Elton Johns and John Denvers who are making trillions in royalties as we sit just thinking about it: This Pag and his band are one *monster* of a recorded act . . .

Lucille and the twin versions of *Louise* are as tough a trio of Little Richard covers ripoffs as have been pulled off by a Caucasian. *J'entends frapper* maintains an amazing consistency of intensity, bringing up the question of whether any other Euro-North-American — anywhere — has ever sizzled at such a level for so long without respite. *Si tu voulais* reorchestrates the '60s on a different nitty-gritty basis with a helluva lot more rhythm than the decadents of the time were able to muster. *Dans le peu* contains echoes of Moby Grape's *Hey Grandma* — which was itself an echo of the '50s and that's a big part of the total Pagliaro show: Hooking up an amp to the echo itself and making sure it's louder this time, and higher up there in sound quality as well. *Fou de toi* feels like a better version of anything on the first Move album.

Turning now to his strictly English work on *Pagliaro I*, four-eyed Pag (the greatest man of spectacles since Buddy Holly) takes on a whole other set of rock and roll role models and once again comes out noticeably ahead. On *I Don't Believe It's You* it's Alice Cooper's *Only Women Bleed*, proof that Pag is as capable of operating within the "modern idiom" as in the company of classic rock-'em-sock-'em of the '60s. *How Does It Feel?* is in the same hot- groan territory as Joe Cocker, Rory Gallagher and company. *Oh Baby (We've Got a Good Thing Goin')* has Pag taking on Jagger in the voice department.

Everything Monsieur Pagliaro touches seems to be a full realization of some rock and roll idea (be it prominent or obscure): call him Mr. Quintessential (and if there's anybody from Quebec who's got a chance of cracking the blasé American market, he's the man).

Richard Meltzer, who achieved stature as an artist by presenting dead animals in Jello and who has the largest bottle-cap collection of any living American writer, is a rock writer whose work has been published by Rolling Stone, Crawdaddy, East Village Other and Creem, among other publications. He is the author of several books on rock and sports.

Michel Pagliaro: Call him Mr. Quintessential

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